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Barlow, Thomas, Sir

Sir Thomas Barlow on
alcohol

[London]

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SIR THOMAS BARLOW ON ALCOHOL.

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An Address delivered at the National Temperance League's Breakfast Meeting at the XVIIth International Congress of Medicine, by Sir Thomas Barlow, Bt., K.C.V.O., M.D., F.R.S., President of the Royal College of Physicians, and of the International Medical Congress.

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SIR THOMAS BARLOW, Bt., K.C.V.O., M.D., F.R.S., President of the Royal College of Physicians, and of the XVIIth International Congress of Medicine, London, 1913, said :—My first words must be those of welcome to you ladies and gentlemen who have honoured us by coming to this Breakfast at this early hour. I esteem it a very great privilege to occupy the position which I do on this occasion, when such a splendid gathering bespeaks, at all events, that everybody present takes a real living interest in this great and important question, whatever may be his actual definite position on the matter.

Let me first of all say one word about the progress of the Temperance Question in this country since our last International Medical Congress. In almost every rank of society this progress has been very remarkable indeed, but it is most delightful to be able to chronicle the great improvement which has taken place in our Army and Navy, and one of the great factors in connection with this has, I take it, been the growth of an altruistic conscience amongst the officers of every grade in both those services. It is perfectly true that a great deal has been done by those splendid philanthropic societies which have provided for the comfort and convenience of the men when they have been off duty, but I wish to accentuate more than that the conscience which has grown up amongst the young officers—their desire to look after their men—and the striking growth in respect to their own example, which is set in the officers' mess.

Well then, to go to another social grade—the commercial class—the change there has been enormous. As Mr. Robert

Whyte (the Chairman of the National Temperance League's Executive, under whose auspices we are here assembled) has just told me, it has become recognized, by the logic of facts, that in these strenuous times a man is not fit for commercial life unless he has completely done with all that old habit of tipping. Now, even heads of businesses—men who perhaps themselves are not abstainers—recognize the enormous value of having abstainers for their clerks and servants in every capacity, and they very soon find out that the men who do not actually get tipsy, but who tingle in between times, are absolutely useless.

I may also here accentuate the fact that in times of strenuous acceleration of motor and railway traffic, the contention we have always made that alcohol takes away the sense of control, that it spoils nervous reaction and makes a man less effective all along the line, is, by the logic of facts, becoming recognized and accepted by the community at large, apart from all sentiment. I will not enlarge upon this line of thought, because it would take too long, but I must make some reference to the enormous change that has taken place in the administration of alcohol in the hospitals, and to the position with regard to the prescription of alcohol in disease. Instead of the old state of things, which many of us perfectly well remember, when, without any question at all, alcohol was ordered as a matter of course, there is now a sense of responsibility coming to every medical man, that he should prescribe exactly how much alcohol he is going to give, and for how long, instead of letting it go on to any indefinite length.

But in spite of all that I have said, we must not live in a fool's paradise. The Drink Bill of this country is still enormously large, and it seems most important that we should find out how that is. The habits of the people are in many ways improved, and yet, consequent upon our great expenditure in alcoholic drink, we still have a tremendous amount of crime,

insanity and illness of various kinds depleting the strength of the country. Alcohol is the most subtle, insidious and evasive kind of poison, and we have got to be on the *qui vive* on every side to see that it does not get the better of us. There is one direction in which this evil is working especially at the present time, and that is in the spread of a most mischievous thing in the shape of medicated wines. A lot of these extracts of various alkaloids, which are combined with alcohol, are most injurious, and in this connection we ought not to ignore them. One of the most interesting things is the way in which alcohol annexes itself to other poisons and intensifies them. We recently had a most remarkable instance of this in the disastrous beer poisoning with arsenic in the North of England. Do let us adopt the common sense which ought to belong to our profession and stamp out these medicated wines. If we are going to give alcohol at all, let us give it by itself, and know the exact quantity, instead of giving way to these quack things, in which we may be giving a very large proportion of alcohol without altogether knowing it.

With regard to the question of alcohol amongst the children and nursing mothers: I really do believe that in this country the conscience has been aroused in this matter. I believe that at length the infant at the breast has come into its kingdom, and we are not going to allow it to be interfered with again. There is a general conviction that nursing mothers ought not to take alcohol, but nourishing food, and I do believe that though our Continental brethren are in many ways ahead of us—and have carried our principles further than we have—yet they have something to learn from us about this. Dr. Weiss has established a most interesting school in Vienna, where every mother who comes for help must not take any form of alcohol, and where Dr. Weiss sets the example for them himself. The progress on this question amongst our brethren, and in respect to hospital and private practice of

all kinds, has been very striking, but there is one thing that will do more good than anything else, and that is the example of doctors themselves. I speak with some experience on this matter. There is such a thing as not having the courage of our convictions—of being so terribly afraid of being set down as faddists and fanatics—that we speak with an uncertain sound.

Now I do beg of you to use your influence with anybody who has come to the conclusion that he can do better without stimulants, as I have for a good many years past, and implore them to have the courage to say so, whatever the consequences may be. It is quite true that that will mean in some cases a certain material loss ; but you will find that it will help you in dealing with those who are even down in the very depths if they know that the doctor who speaks to them is willing to carry out what he preaches. The infinite difference that it makes when one takes that line ; the difference that it makes in the prognosis of inebriety, when the doctor and the nurse conspire together and summon up all their friends in a conspiracy of help, is stupendous. I beg of you not to be ashamed of the faith that is in you ; do not be afraid of having it known on which side you stand, and then, believe me, you will have your reward.

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